

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ‘GOLDEN YEARS’ IN A REGIONAL CITY

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ABSTRACT

Several projects relating to older learners have been conducted over the past decade or so, some involving the University of the Third Age (U3A) Whyalla, as well as other groups composed of older citizens. Some provide examples of engagement with the local university campus; others have this potential. Here a wide range of learning activities, as revealed by survey data, publicly available information, and participant observation, are described. Together with long-running group activities, new activities – a men’s shed and a music learning activity – have potential outcomes for participants’ health and wellbeing. Such informal and non-formal learning opportunities help meet non-metropolitan lifelong learning needs. Some discussion of possible solutions to unmet needs is included. Maximising information sharing and cooperation can lead to mutual benefits, including for educational institutions. Increasing social inclusion benefits the whole community.

Key words: older learners, life-long learning, social inclusion

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Golden Years’ has often been used to describe what is also termed the ‘third age’, or age of active retirement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people able to do so have taken the opportunity to retire from their paid employment in the prime of their lives in order to pursue other interests. For them, the golden years may extend for some decades. Others have given up their paid employment after amassing sufficient funds to be independent retirees or on reaching the age at which they qualified for the Aged Pension (ABS, 2013). Then, experience informs us, there are those for whom other circumstances – redundancy, health issues, caring responsibilities – have forced their early retirement. While some do not contemplate retirement while they are absorbed in fulfilling paid work, the recent issue related to raising the Aged Pension qualifying age (National Commission of Audit, 2014) may mean delaying the third age of active retirement for those who will need to rely on government support. For some then, retiring after more than five decades of labouring work, rest may be all that is sought! There are also many, it may be surmised, for whom these golden years are not so positive, if various health issues hold them back from full enjoyment of them.

While phrases such as ‘the ageing tsunami’ raise fears of society being unable to cope with an increasing older population, stressing *ageing’s deleterious impact on the economy* (van Onselen, 2014, p. 1), recent reports manifest a wider view. The *Blueprint for an Ageing Australia* (Advisory Panel on Positive Ageing [APPA], 2014) outlines the positives of the changing age distribution, proclaiming that *ageing is a social and economic asset* (p. 6), provided that the transition is

managed successfully by organising society appropriately and adapting psychologically. Its recommendations cover: business opportunities, mature-age employment, philanthropy, enabling environments, retirement incomes, technology, and wellbeing (APPA, 2014, p. 9). While recognising barriers as well as opportunities, the report stresses the need to be inclusive of all social groups, irrespective of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and alludes to older people's many current contributions *through informal work and voluntary activities, as well as intergenerational exchanges of cash and family support* (APPA, 2014, p. 36), and through continuing formal paid employment for some. An earlier report (Millane, 2013) also looks at opportunities to steer society in a positive direction, while not ignoring negative implications of the new demographic profile. While ageist stereotypes have led to a decrease in some opportunities, some businesses have tapped into the advantages that older workers bring (Naughton, 2014).

A series of research projects conducted in regional South Australia form the background to this paper. The first focused on University of the Third Age Whyalla (U3A) members' motivation for continuing to learn and their perceptions of the importance of this (Ellis, 2006). For many years, the local University of South Australia (UniSA) campus has sponsored this group, providing a dedicated on-campus meeting room. Another study identified mutual benefits of the U3A–UniSA relationship (Ellis, 2009; Ellis & Leahy, 2011). A later project investigated what university connections existed, had done so, or could potentially evolve with other community organisations that included seniors in their membership. It also canvassed any potential interest in formal university studies by these older citizens (Ellis, 2013a). Older students (55 and over) who were already studying through the Whyalla Campus or the Mount Gambier Regional Centre were also surveyed about their experiences of being a university student in later years (Ellis, 2013b).

The current paper documents parts of the survey of Whyalla organisations not yet included in published accounts. As well as briefly considering past, present and potential links with the university campus, it draws on findings from the earlier studies and other materials concerning the activities of groups involving seniors in the regional area. It describes the range of learning opportunities available, identifies the benefits of access to learning opportunities, including some recent initiatives, and discusses unmet needs and possible solutions.

OLDER LEARNERS

Lifelong learning is an ideal for all, and not only to keep up with vocational requirements. Delors describes such learning as *the heartbeat of society* (1996, p. 20). It encompasses learning to know, to do and to live together and with others, for all of which learning to learn is essential (Delors, 1996). As the UniSA Vice-Chancellor told the 2014 graduands, *Your education doesn't stop here. In fact, 20 years from now: 30, 40 even 50 years from now, if you've stopped learning then you've learned nothing* (Lloyd, 2014). While some may think that our brains are on a steady downward slope as we age, this has been refuted by, for example, Ramscar, Hendrix, Shaoul, Milin and Baayen (2014), who attribute apparent slower thinking by older people simply to the fact that they have so much more accumulated information to process (Universität Tübingen, 2014). Strauch's *Secrets of the grown-up brain* (2010) describes the cognitive abilities that can *improve* with age. Myriad examples of older people flourishing in later life, learning new skills, contributing from their accumulated wisdom, and achieving academic success give lie to notions of inevitable intellectual deterioration. In fact, contrasting with the trials of dementia for some are the achievements of people such as Elisabeth Kirkby – awarded a PhD at the age of 93 (ABC Radio National, 2014). Similarly, Lear has documented the achievements of third age learners in both her honours and doctoral studies (Lear, 2003, 2013).

Not only can older people learn, it is important that they do so – research has indicated that cognitive exercise can assist in delaying the onset of dementia (Valenzuela & Sachdev, 2009). Additionally, the self-esteem that can come from learning new things, skills as well as facts and understanding, and learning to express oneself creatively also has undoubted health benefits.

When such learning occurs in a group situation, the added benefits of social engagement also contribute to health and wellbeing (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, 2010). An English study of 6,500 people aged 52 or older confirmed that *both isolation and loneliness impair quality of life and well-being*, with reducing isolation seen as having the greater effect on mortality (Stephoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013, p. 5797). Moreover, it is important to counter negative stereotypes of the learning abilities of older people, as *self-perception can exert a strong influence on what is actually learned from the environment* (Dweck, 1999, as cited in Ramscar et al., 2014, p. 35); it is therefore important that older adults do not let themselves be convinced that their learning days are over. The Age Discrimination Commissioner, in launching the Age Positive website, also called for ‘unhelpful stereotypes’ to be confronted (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011) – also a matter of human rights (Human Rights Law Centre, 2011).

Not only does social inclusion have benefits for the individuals concerned, increasing social inclusion also has benefits for their communities. Expanded social networks can be conducive to finding innovative solutions for community issues, as widened knowledge sources can be tapped. For example, one organisation with knowledge of sources of grant funding may be able to share this with another group at a loss as to how to fund a new venture. Such networks include those derived from education, bringing *positive outcomes in both self-realisation and social achievement* (Marchant, 2013, p. 1). Lear (2013) gives an example of how local knowledge spurred action in a 2005 bushfire emergency: long before metropolitan fire managers realised the potential dangers, an elderly woman looked at the sky and, knowing the location of the fire, went to prepare the local bowling club as a place of rest and refuge, anticipating that it would be needed by firefighters and community members. Lear (2013) also provides examples of initiatives implemented through cooperative action by older women. These include taking a more active role in boards and committees and setting up new ventures, including small businesses, in response to the rural downturn in the 1990s which resulted from the restructuring of the Australian rural economy (Tonts, Argent, & Plummer, 2012).

LEARNING IN THE REGIONS

As well as formal learning opportunities (usually formally assessed and accredited) available through regional university and TAFE campuses, and by online delivery, much non-formal (organised, but not formally assessed) and informal learning (often incidental to other activities) is available to those in the regions through a range of organisations in which people are members or clients. (For a more detailed description of formal, non-formal and informal learning, see Ellis, 2013a.) The Regional Australia Institute, in calling for positive stories relating to the ageing population trend, reminds us that regional populations often have a higher average age than the national one, with Baby Boomers (1946–1964 births) making up 45 per cent of the workforce (Regional Australia Institute, 2014). Many older citizens have ongoing job-related learning needs, while those out of the workforce may look for learning in line with their own personal interests and needs.

Some organisations that serve regional Australians and encourage personal development and learning have been in operation for a considerable time. For example, the Country Women’s Association of Australia (CWAA) proclaims on its website (<http://www.cwaa.org.au/>) that it has been *servicing the nation since 1922*. From its origins in the eastern states, a federal body developed, the first national conference being held in South Australia in 1946 (CWA, n.d.). Its membership covers the generations and allows many older women to contribute their knowledge of a wide range of skills and crafts to younger members.

Various international service organisations such as Rotary International have a regional as well as a metropolitan membership, now of both genders, and provide learning opportunities for their members through taking on new club roles, hearing from dinner speakers, and the learning that comes through their service activities. Zonta International, for executive and professional women, also has non-metropolitan branches that enable women to advocate for other women,

and provide educational opportunities (www.zonta.org); membership may be more diverse in regional Zonta clubs; for example, the Port Lincoln club includes women who *work at the front line for government departments, but a number are retired, ... and several come from the rural sector* (G. Lear, personal communication, September 22, 2014).

Much informal learning takes place through country people's many volunteer roles – in sporting clubs, churches, hospital auxiliaries, and schools. Apart from national organisations such as the CWA, smaller groups run by churches, and community centres have provided many opportunities through craft groups, particularly for women, and usually for women no longer in the work force. However, the Masonic Lodges comprise one predominantly male organisation where learning occurs in such areas as meeting procedures, public speaking and committing freemasonry rituals to memory. In recent years, in response to a lack of opportunities for older men to meet together, there has been the development of men's sheds, where men can talk together, support one another, express their creativity through woodworking and other activities, and often gain a renewed sense of wellbeing and purpose through contributing to other organisations in their community (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007; Misan & Sergeant, 2009).

U3A has had a presence in Australia for thirty years. While it began in France in 1972, and spread to other countries, developing a different model in some, including Britain, the first U3A group in Australia began in Melbourne in 1984. (For a brief history of U3A, and the formation of the U3A Australia Alliance, see <http://www.adelaideu3a.on.net/> and <http://www.u3aaa.org/>.) U3A online has been a boon to people in isolated places, as long as they have satisfactory Internet access, to people in cities who prefer to study online, and to those who have issues preventing them from joining community groups, such as health problems or limitations imposed by caring for others. It is also accessible by people outside of Australia (U3A Online, n.d.; National Seniors, 2013).

In recent decades in many places throughout the world there have been initiatives to set up, through engaging existing government and non-government entities, learning communities that have the aim of *building lifelong learning opportunities as a basis for improved community cohesion and function* (Cavaye, Wheeler, Wong, Simmons, Herlihy, & Saleeba, 2013, p. 597); improving and initiating programs and events to foster learning following needs analysis. Part of the aim of the 2013 UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning's International Conference on Learning Cities was to *create a dynamic international platform for cities to exchange ideas and good practices on effective approaches to building learning cities* (UNESCO, 2013). Some Australian examples are described by Cavaye et al. (2013), including many where local government has been a key player. Communities have adopted descriptors for themselves such as 'learning town'. Some have set up 'learning hubs', where facilities such as Internet access are available (e.g., Warracknabeal's Community House, which covers learning, health, and counselling, as well as including an Internet café: K. Willsher, personal communications, April 15 & September 11, 2014). Moonee Valley, also in Victoria, provides other recent examples (City of Moonee Valley, 2012; 2013). A South Australian small town provider of learning opportunities – in this case fostering the social inclusion of older people (and carers) – is Goolwa's Alexandrina Centre for Positive Ageing, which includes a range of workshops and classes in its program (Caggiano, 2014).

RESEARCH PROJECT: SURVEY OF ORGANISATIONS

There are many learning opportunities for people of all ages in Whyalla, a South Australian regional city of approximately 23 000, including pre-schools and schools, both government and non-government, and a TAFE SA campus, in addition to the UniSA campus already mentioned. The research described in this paper focuses on opportunities for learning by older residents outside of the formal tertiary offerings.

Aims

While the original purpose of the survey was to identify areas of past, present and potential links between the local university campus and organisations catering to older citizens, including any interest by members in formal study, secondary analysis also identified a wide range of non-formal and informal learning activities, that are part of the life of these groups.

Methods

Following the granting of university human research ethics committee approval, eligible organisations were identified from the annual publication, *The Whyalla Guide*, local knowledge possessed by the author and/or by networks both inside and outside UniSA, and approached (by telephone, e-mail or letter) for an indication of whether they would be interested in taking part in this qualitative descriptive study. Qualitative approaches give the opportunity for gathering *culturally specific and contextually rich data* (Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2011, p. vi). Approval of the organisational leadership was gained (via an e-mail granting permission or the return of a tear-off slip from the letter of invitation, with which Reply Paid envelopes were supplied) before approaching any individual members. A project information sheet was supplied to all participants. Booklets outlining UniSA Whyalla program offerings were provided in order to help participants identify possible future links of mutual benefit. Data gathering began late in 2010 and extended over the following year; organisations were approached at different times, as time allowed and as new information became available, about further groups that should be included. The process continued until it was judged that data had been obtained from the desired variety of groups.

Paper-based questionnaires used for the survey were considered adequate for the original purpose of gaining an overview of these organisations and university links. Two types were distributed; one was to be completed by the secretary or president or other leader and the other to be completed anonymously by individual members of the organisation. Reply Paid envelopes were made available.

Organisational data provided by office-bearers are included in this paper. The first group of questions aimed to build a profile of the organisation: name, aims, length of time operating in Whyalla, age range, numbers of members/attendees, meeting frequency and average attendance, and other information considered significant by the respondent. The second section comprised questions about any past or existing links with UniSA (Whyalla):

- Has your organisation/group ever visited the university campus as part of your annual program? (Yes / No / Not applicable) If Yes, what did you do there?
- Have you ever had a visit from a UniSA speaker? (Yes / No / Not applicable) If Yes, circle any that apply: staff member / student / individual / group On what topic?
- Has your organisation/group ever taken part in a UniSA research project? (Yes / No / Don't know)

The final section asked about possible future links with UniSA in Whyalla:

- Does your organisation/group have needs that UniSA staff might be able to assist with? (Yes / No). Please describe these needs.
- Can you think of other ways in which the University could help your organisation/group? Please suggest some ways.
- Can you think of ways in which your organisation/group could help the University? Please suggest some ways. If possible, mention which areas they could help most – Business, Nursing, Social Work, Engineering, Foundation Studies (preparation for university).

The questionnaire targeting individual members of the organisations asked about any connections they had had with the campus (visiting library or café, attending open days or public

seminars etc.) and whether family members had studied there. It also asked about respondents' possible interest in further formal education at the campus.

Questionnaire data were collated, summarised using a table for closed questions in the organisational profile section, and responses to the open-ended questions were analysed. In general, the questions themselves determined the categories. With the small number of organisations involved, it was possible to extract information manually. Few responses were received regarding possible future mutual assistance. (Even in the individual members' survey, although 66 people participated, not all responded to every open question.)

Supplementary details were drawn from publicly available community information sources.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Findings relating to individual group members' interest in further formal education have been described earlier (Ellis, 2013a). These include minimal interest in undertaking a whole university program (only four out of 66), but more (15) were interested in possibly taking a course. The main motivations for possible study were interest and intellectual stimulation, while the most commonly identified discouraging factor was lack of time, followed by cost, age, health, commitments, wanting to do other things such as travel, and transport. Here the learning opportunities provided by the surveyed groups are considered and the possibilities of links with the local university campus.

Twenty-one community groups or organisations were approached concerning their willingness to participate and allow questionnaires to be distributed to their members. Four declined; one returned responses from individuals, but not from a leader. One individual from a group not contacted who had heard about the survey also wanted to express his views. Fifteen groups (out of 17 that had given permission for involvement), including service clubs, craft groups, senior citizens' and retirees' organisations, community welfare volunteers, a sporting group, and a heritage group, returned a response from an office-bearer or similar with knowledge of group numbers etc. The Appendix provides a profile of these groups, apart from the one from which only individual members' responses were obtained.

In addition, group responses to questions about any involvement with the university campus comprised: visits to the university (only one, for a grant workshop), visits from a university speaker (one), and participation in a university research project (one, and individual members of some other groups). Some individual responses had also mentioned attending some public lectures, community forums etc., as well as involvement in U3A. A request for suggestions concerning possible future links with UniSA or ways in which UniSA could assist the organisation/group, and vice versa, attracted few replies. These included provision of guest speakers (by UniSA and by the group), possible mentoring of students by retired professionals, and UniSA assistance with health and ageing issues and grant applications. There was a request for more notification by UniSA of events that group members could attend.

The research process revealed a lack of awareness by many local residents of what the university offered locally, but also provided some opportunity to raise the awareness of those involved in the survey, not only of programs offered but also of possible opportunities for cooperation with educational institutions such as UniSA. It also amassed information about the activities and memberships of the organisations consulted – useful for future university engagements, and also indicating any needs or opportunities for further research that would be of benefit to this age group.

The survey contributed to an overview of informal and non-formal learning activities provided by these varied organisations, indicating many social, personal, and intellectual benefits inherent in them, possible opportunities for cooperation across groups and organisations, and prompted questions about how learning needs of older citizens could be met.

This survey of groups does not pretend to be exhaustive – there are numerous other groups/organisations within Whyalla whose membership includes, in some cases predominantly, people of retirement age – church fellowship groups, including craft groups and study groups, other sporting groups (e.g. croquet, indoor bowls), other groups connected with the Tanderra Craft Village (e.g. woodworking) other volunteer organisations, returned services groups, environmental interest groups, support groups (e.g. Whyalla Pink Spirits, supporting breast cancer survivors; Heartbeat Whyalla, supporting and raising money for cardiac patients and their families; and more). A writer’s group, which had been in recess for some time, has recently been revived.

Information about the activities of other organisations is available from *The Whyalla Guide* (2014) (produced annually and delivered to households) and the Council Internet sites (City of Whyalla, 2014). Some of the types of learning identifiable, with considerable overlap, in both the surveyed organisations and others, are:

- Learning skills – sports, crafts, gardening, woodworking, computer literacy;
- Learning through serving others – Lifeline counselling and shop, St John Volunteers, Royal Flying Doctor Service Whyalla Support Group, Hospital Auxiliary, Meals on Wheels;
- Learning from visiting speakers – Rotary and other service clubs, church and other groups;
- Learning how to relate to others – sharing common interests (craft, cards, puzzles, board games, sport, music, dancing, drama, singing, family history, photography, model railways, astronomy);
- Learning about health and how to manage health conditions – Health in our Hands (<http://www.inourhands.com.au>, Diabetic Support Group);
- Learning about improving the community and environment – Advancing Whyalla, Friends of the Conservation Park (<http://www.fwcp.org/>), Whyalla Revegetation Group, EcoLETS (<http://whyallaecoletsorg.fatcow.com/>);
- Learning to advocate/protest – Alternative Ports Working Party. Various Facebook groups (e.g. Compassion and Justice for Refugees, Whyalla) and associated activities also engage a wide age range.

While leisure classes offered in earlier years by TAFE are no longer available, nor are short-lived Adult and Community Education program at the university campus, a neighbourhood centre runs a range of classes (including literacy and numeracy, cooking, computing, life skills courses); computing classes are also available through the Anglicare Outreach Centre. So in Whyalla there is considerable scope for seniors to keep on learning in a wide variety of ways, individually as well as in the groups mentioned, sometimes without realising that they are in fact learning!

SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Among some more recent initiatives are the establishment of a men’s shed, and additions to the U3A range of activities.

In June 2014, a Whyalla Men’s Shed – ‘where men work at play’ – finally began operations in its permanent location (<http://www.whyallamensshed.org.au/>), following much planning and support from many individuals and organisations, including the local university campus, which is represented on the management committee of this incorporated body. A successful Open Day and official opening in September introduced its facilities to the public (Lewis, 2014). As well as providing a place that local men can call their own, it provides a venue for learning, not only practical skills, but also potentially about physical and mental health issues in a non-threatening environment. A reluctance exhibited by many men to seek help and advice about health matters has meant that health professionals and others, concerned about men’s health issues and seeking to reach such an audience, have had to find other ways to approach them. This has led to

setting up informal peer learning opportunities, where men do not feel patronised, and where the actual coming together with common aims also promotes wellbeing (Golding, 2014). The Shed includes computers; while there are many advantages to intergenerational learning with different ages learning from each other, some older men prefer not to rely on their grandchildren to teach them to use modern technologies (personal communication, B. Marshall, 14 September 2014). While it is open to men of all ages, the membership is predominantly older, the average age being in the mid-sixties or higher.

The Whyalla U3A program has always been very varied, including topics to do with languages, history, science, one-off guest speakers, excursions, and social activities, including 'leisurely lunches', quizzes, cards and games. The latter have included those introduced by members from other cultural backgrounds (Kubb, Sjoelen, of Scandinavian and Dutch origin, respectively). In recent times, Tai Chi classes have been added, and the latest addition is a ukulele group (Davis, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Why is the availability of learning opportunities important for the 'third age'? Not only can older people learn, they, like all age groups, have a need to learn.

With all the varied activities available, many of which are described above (and also see the Appendix), are there any gaps? Rather than some body such as the local council or another organisation thinking that there is a need for a particular group and setting about establishing it, a greater sense of ownership will come when people who see a need, because of particular circumstances in their lives or particular interests, set the wheels in motion themselves, drawing on the assistance and expertise of other organisations where necessary. For this to happen, good organisational publicity is needed. Here is an opportunity for cooperation, for example in sharing activities in newsletters, as well as tapping into free publicity opportunities provided by the *Whyalla News* and City Council.

During 2013 discussions, sponsored by Advancing Whyalla (<http://www.advancingwhyalla.org.au/>), were held concerning possible needs for a Community Learning Hub to cater for all sectors of the community. People from many different groups/organisations, including schools, hospital, TAFE, Anglicare and more, attended a meeting at the Public Library and later had the opportunity to respond to a working paper. While some efforts to establish a learning centre are still being made, progress slowed after hoped-for state government social inclusion funding was no longer forthcoming (C. Hutchinson, personal communications, June 13, 2014; May 13, 2015).

An illustration of the way in which diverse groups can assist one another is provided by a recent initiative – the new Men's Shed has assisted with making some equipment (boards for Sjoelen or Dutch shuffleboard) for the U3A (University of the Third Age, 2014). Boards have also been provided to aged care facilities. The more that groups can be made aware of each other's aims and activities, the more likely it is that such cooperation and interaction can produce profitable outcomes.

Partnerships in which the University campus has been involved include its long-term sponsorship of the U3A and its comparatively recent sponsorship of the Whyalla Men's Shed. The confusion of some survey respondents about what the University offers in Whyalla, and the available there, means that there is scope for better publicising of these opportunities so that people are more aware of what support they could tap into. The University's community engagement activities can play a part in this; many of these include learning opportunities – Male Out (a family fun day, with an emphasis on male health), and, in past years, annual health fairs in the shopping mall.

While some of the activities described here may be replicated in larger cities, these learning opportunities help meet non-metropolitan lifelong learning needs. While many such needs may

be similar for residents both of capital cities and in the regions, opportunities to satisfy them are more plentiful in larger population centres, with a greater variety of expertise to facilitate them. On the other hand, there are learning needs specific to rural and remote residents: for example, even in larger centres, there is often a need to travel to the metropolitan area for specialist medical treatment, necessitating learning to find one's way around in an unfamiliar environment; moreover, in smaller, less diverse communities, some less outgoing individuals interested in learning can find it easier to stay in their comfort zone (G. Lear, personal communication, May 4, 2015). Many rural social and community organisations have a wider age range, providing opportunities for intergenerational learning (e.g. younger women learning traditional crafts from older CWA members). Importantly, group learning activities also mitigate the isolation that some older people experience when retired and no longer interacting regularly with workmates, or when widowed and living alone. Health professionals recognise the risks of this: one response from a craft group included: *For some it is the only outing for the week. Some have been referred to us by their doctors.* In small communities, people often belong to a number of groups – and *their sense of connectivity and local knowledge is a major strength* (G. Lear, e-mail communication, May 12, 2015).

FURTHER DIRECTIONS

It is important to consider whether such needs are able to be met for people living in remote outback areas, or others who find it difficult to attend classes or meetings. Where there is reliable Internet access, opportunities abound, such as through U3A Online, or Coursera, an education platform that partners with top universities and organisations worldwide to offer courses online for anyone to take, for free (Coursera, 2014). However, there may be locations where such learning links are not available. Moreover, how can remote residents' social learning needs be met? In the past, the radio 'galah sessions' provided a way of sharing news, useful knowledge, and maintaining social connections over a distance, *a lifeline for people on isolated stations, both literally and socially* (Theobald, 2012). There is scope for identifying, in partnership with the people concerned, remote needs and ways of responding to them – needs that could range from health knowledge to agricultural developments to farm succession planning.

We have been considering mainly what is known as the 'third age', the age of active retirement. However, the more dependent fourth age still has learning needs and possibilities. Responding to these can enrich the lives of people needing to live in aged care facilities. Perhaps there is a place for a 'U4A' (University of the Fourth Age). Limited online access in some aged care facilities means that some people with mobility problems (and limited incomes) have fewer options for self-directed learning. There is scope for exploring available grants that could increase Internet availability in aged hostel accommodation.

Intergenerational learning has many untapped opportunities; not only can the young often teach their elders from their confidence with new technologies, they can also learn much from the stories told and wisdom shared by older people. Mentoring situations provide opportunities for expertise and knowledge built up over a lifetime of work and living to be passed on to a younger generation and not be wasted, as well as meeting older people's generativity needs, a concern for *establishing and guiding the next generation* and including *productivity and creativity* (Erikson, 1950, cited in Slater, 2003, p. 57).

CONCLUSION

This paper has given an overview of the variety of learning activities available for a particular community's older citizens. Learning activities for older people should not be seen just as a substitute for daytime television, or something for people to do who are not interested in bowls or croquet, but to serve a real purpose: disseminating information, meeting social needs, fostering equity, nurturing skills to be responsible citizens, and providing service opportunities. Ensuring that this group is not ignored is also a matter of human rights (Blessinger, 2015).

While recognising the diverse needs of seniors in the community, we must also recognise their expertise and wisdom that enable them to continue to make significant contributions to their families, their communities and the wider world. Educational institutions can be involved not only in meeting the needs of older citizens through providing needed educational programs and researching issues affecting older people, but also in benefiting from their continuing contributions as study informants, mentors to young professionals, and volunteers of various kinds. All sectors, from early childhood to higher education, can engage in collaborative activities, making intergenerational links and working for mutual benefit. A commitment to community engagement and research is essential to maximise social inclusion and mutual benefits.

In the case of our university, this contributes to its commitment to *engagement with society beyond the classroom and campus* (UniSA, 2013, Action Set 5):

UniSA will build on its strong social mission and commitment to the communities it serves, adding value to the economic and social environment of our society. (UniSA, 2013, Action Set 5)

The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA)'s aspirations are also relevant for all generations. While the organisation's emphasis in activities tends to be on school sectors, SPERA's vision – which relates building and promoting *the capacity of rural and remote learning communities* through making links between *people and organisations that come with a diverse range of skills, abilities and knowledge*, building partnerships, and *encouraging innovative and creative thinking to improve quality learning outcomes for rural Australia* (Noble, 2014, p. 1) – has relevance for older learners as well as for those of younger age groups.

Partnerships, an aspect of learning communities essential for optimal achievement of learning goals, can involve information sharing, collaboration and cooperation between organisations, including educational institutions. Likewise intergenerational partnerships may be entered into by individuals. All such connections have the potential to lead to mutual benefits and enhance the learning outcomes for old and young alike. It is to be hoped that many people living in and/or concerned about learning in the regions share in the aspirations of institutions and organisations promoting education at all age levels, and fully support efforts to realise them, recognising the part that they can play in facilitating social inclusion, to the benefit of the whole community.

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Appendix: Summary of organisations surveyed

Organisation/group	Aims	Years operating (at survey date)	Age range	Number of members/average attendance	Meetings
Whyalla Art Group Inc.	Promote membership and participation	60	19–80	approx. 30 (incl. out-of town & passive / 8–9	informally: weekly; formally: bimonthly
Anglicare Outreach Centre	Provide emergency relief and functions for special interest groups	>25	25–65	50 / 2–8 at groups	Monday–Friday, different groups
Kum'an'do (at Bunyarra Baptist)	Provide a safe place to learn craft, find friends, hear about God's love	28	Mid 20s–80+	approx. 120 / 110	weekly
Whyalla Norrie CWA	Promote crafts, friendship, caring for others	33	55–90	15 / 14	weekly
Evening Branch CWA	Learn craft, service to community, provide friendship	39	40–90+	10 / 7–10	weekly
Whyalla EcoLETS	Demonstrate community gardening, growing organic vegetables and fruit in a harsh climate in a sustainable, water-wise garden	9	32–73	21; 6 current gardeners / 3–4	biweekly
Whyalla Golf and Bowling Club	Promote the sport of golf and lawn bowling	approx. 50	8–86	Golf: 320 Bowls: 70 / varies	Golf: various competitions, Tuesday–Sunday; Bowls: Tuesday–Sunday, except for Friday
Whyalla Garden Society	Promote good gardening, help local gardeners grow things suitable to the area; assist in recognising problems (re bugs, etc.) and give advice	65	40–70+	45 / varies: approx. 25–30	monthly

Association of Independent Retirees	Advocate government agencies for benefit of retirees, especially self-funded, and distribute information pertaining to seniors' life style	22	55–80+	65 / 20	bimonthly
Lifeline Country to Coast SA Inc.	Reach out across the community, providing help to those who need or want it through volunteers with an interest in helping others	27	30–75	- / N/A	N/A
Whyalla Norrie Probus Club Inc.	Promote social interaction: fun, friendship and fellowship with guest speakers, outings and trips away	27	60–90+	98 + 3 Life Members / 60–65	monthly
(National Trust) Mt Laura Homestead Museum	Preserve the history of Whyalla; display historical items for locals and tourists	40	50–94	about 20 / 12–15	monthly
SA Pensioners Association	Give friendship and support to one another whilst enjoying a different range of activities; raise issues that concern members	59	65–92	25 / 14	weekly (Monday noon–4.30)
Hand Spinners and Weavers Guild	Teach and understand spinning and weaving; also teach knitting and crochet on request, and felting and bobbin lace; encourage friendship	37	40–80	15 / 10 at least	monthly
Hospital Ladies Auxiliary	Raise money to support needs of hospital patients and staff that cannot be funded by the Government	60+	40–90	30 / 20	monthly